Standing in Two Worlds
Camille Leihulu Slagle
Educate Episode

[tiktok video] Hawaii may be your getaway paradise, but it is our home. There are people living here, who have been living here since 400 AD. This is our home. (fade under)

[theme hold under Nevaeh’s intro]

Nevaeh Nez: From APM, this is Educate.

The voice you just heard is Camille Leihulu Slagle. She’s Native Hawaiian… and a college student.

Today on the podcast we’re bringing you a bonus episode from our project, *Standing in Two Worlds: Native American College Diaries*. I’m Nevaeh Nez. I’m Hopi and Navajo.

Indigenous students like Camille and me are just a tiny fraction of all the college students in the United States. Honestly, most colleges and universities just aren’t designed for us. And the education system in America was once used to erase our native languages and cultures. But in this project, four Native college students tell our own stories. We’re using higher education to strengthen ties to our Native roots…and to help sustain our people.

In the last episode of the podcast, you heard me tell about striving to become a physician…even though I’d never met a Native doctor growing up. This time, Camille will tell about leaving Hawaii for college…so she can return home someday….for good.

Music: MYMA_JUST_0078_02001_The_Lost_Island_Bridge_APM-22


Camille Leihulu Slagle: Hi, my name is Camille Leihulu Slagle. I am native Hawaiian from Kailua on the island of Oahu in Hawaii. I am currently finishing up my sophomore year at Stanford University studying chemistry as my major and I'm minoring in geological sciences or geology.
Camille Leihulu Slagle: I'm also part Japanese, my mother is Hawaiian Japanese mix. And my father is German, Irish, so white, so I'm kind of a little melting pot, just like the rest of Hawaii. I'm like, I'm representative of this little, like melting pot of racial ethnicity. So it's just something so amazing to just grow up at the intersection of a lot of different things. But even though I am a lot of different things I solely like full-on will always identify as Hawaiian first and foremost, just due to the way I was raised, due to the culture I was raised in, due to the place I grew up in. I was fortunate enough to grow up in my indigenous homelands. And I am so thankful for that.

(bird sfx and hold under)

Camille Leihulu Slagle: One of my ultimate dreams is for people to see Hawaii in the same way I do. To see it for all of it both natural beauty but its cultural beauty as well because there is no Hawaii without Hawaiians. And so my ultimate goal is to give back to my people, to my lāhui, in the way that I know best and the way I know possible for me, which is through science. So my ultimate goal is to someday, hopefully, work at the Hawaii Volcanoes National Park and become a geochemist working to study and further understand and improve our knowledge of these volcanoes and of these huge monstrous beings that are creating the Hawaiian Islands.

(sfx of walking, hold under scene)

Camille Leihulu Slagle: So this Nahu lava tube. It's a lava tube on Hawaii Island in Kilauea in Hawaii Volcanoes National Park.

[video: “this is like my dream right now”]

Camille Leihulu Slagle: So a lava tube is basically made when the outside of the lava that's exposed to the air cools down, but the lava underneath that—so below ground— is still running and still flowing through because it's super hot and insulated…and then what's left behind is literally like a tunnel.

Camille Leihulu Slagle: So it's about a half mile long and you walk through it and there's a lot of dripping water stalactites hanging from the ceiling. Just a very sense of like dark mysterious-like aura to it because you really can't see that far in front of you because it's so long and so dark

[sfx of video of walking through lava tunnel]
Camille Leihulu Slagle: It's the perfect intersection for me of both my culture and of science because it's creating new land but also creating more of Hawaii and more for my people at the exact same time.

(driving sfx)

Camille Leihulu Slagle: Ok so I’m currently driving. This is my home! Like this is where I want to end up for the rest of my life. Like, watching so many outsiders come in to Hawaii, or so many jobs in Hawaii outsourced from people on the continent because people think that Hawaiians aren't capable enough of doing these jobs on our own, like, no, there's plenty of talent located here locally, but just outsourcing contributes to the rising costs of living, to gentrification of these communities. Every time I go to the continent and come back home for a spring break, or summer break, or anything from college, I see something in my community that is changed, that is different, and not in a good way. So it's really been eye opening, I think, to leave and then come back where in the short span of one quarter, of 10 weeks of my life so much in my community has changed back home. And it's really terrifying to see that all of this is occurring within the short span of my lifetime.

(music from one of Camille’s TikTok videos)

Camille Leihulu Slagle: I decided to use TikTok as kind of my educational platform for people. It’s really easy, really accessible and I thought if I can upload a :60 video that’s common knowledge, like the back of my hand, why wouldn’t I? It seems like a win-win for everybody.

Video: (fade up) … so today, in 1895, the Queen Liliuokalani, our last reigning monarch was illegally, forcefully imprisoned in her own home in Iolani Palace for eight months because Americans believed that she was trying to overthrow the American government.

Obviously, Indigenous history is not something that's taught across the U.S. in history classes in textbooks at all. So I realized if that's not something that people are going to teach to others, it's something I'm gonna have to take up for myself and help do that education.

[tiktok video] Every day Hawaiians would deliver our queen flowers, but they wrapped that bouquet of flowers in the newspaper. And that is how she was able to keep up with current events that were happening outside of her room…we were able to outsmart what was supposed to be the biggest government at that time (fade out)

[ establish music and hold under] MYMA_JUST_0078_06401_The_Lost_Island_Bridge_APM
The Hawaiian language, right when the overthrow of Hawaii happened in 1893, right at that time, Hawaiian language and Hawaiian culture and basically being Hawaiian, in a sense, was banned in Hawaii…. So for about a century, it was really hard to grow up and try and continue to teach your children and their children the Hawaiian language and Hawaiian culture, because there were all of these bans basically put on it in schools where you were not allowed to speak Hawaiian, you are not allowed to dance hula, you are not allowed to do a lot of culturally significant things. So for a long time, Hawaiian was considered a dying language because it was basically impossible to teach it.

So from kindergarten to senior year, I went to an all native Hawaiian private school called Kamehameha schools. So it is basically a school founded by Native Hawaiians for Native Hawaiians to be able to have an education and both Hawaiian and normal Western education values and I was able to go to that school as well as my parents and my mother went and all five of her siblings as well. So it's a school that's been serving Native Hawaiians for over a century now.

Camille’s mom: Good morning, Camille Leihulu Slagle.

So I called my mother because I wanted to know why she wanted to send me to this school.

Mom: Okay, so the decision to send you to command may Ha, was pretty much based on coming here may have been top notch. Excellent. Known for just the best.

My mom went to Kamehameha from seventh grade to her senior year. She graduated in 1985. So there's a big difference between when she went there and when I went there I entered the school in 2007.

Mom: I don't remember too many people taking Hawaiian language as a choice if it was there. Most people were taking Spanish or Japanese or French. And I think there may have been Hawaiian, but at that time, it was sort of like, oh, well take this because that's gonna get you a better thing to get into college take this language instead, not Hawaiian, it's not recognized, you know, for a college acceptance thing.

Camille: So I always knew that I wanted to go away for college. As much as I love Hawaii, it is very isolated…So I knew I wanted to go out and get a bigger world perspective and world view….And while I'm up here, I'm trying to get as much information and as much knowledge as
possible to be able to bring back home and help my people, especially because Native Hawaiians have some of the lowest rates of high school graduation and college enrollment in the first place.

Ad clip: College Horizons is a six day crash course for American Indian, Native Alaskan and Native Hawaiian students who are looking to apply to college (fade under)

Camille Leihulu Slagle
I found out about the program my sophomore year of high school because my mother was talking to her one of her friends, and one of her friend’s children had done the program. And it was like, hey, like, You should do this to my friend's kid got into Yale, like, you could get into a good school too.

Adrienne: Hello!
Camille: Hello!

I first met Adrian Keene at College Horizons.

(Cherokee introduction) Hi, everyone. I'm Adrian Keene. I am a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, and I am a faculty member currently at Brown University in the American Studies and Ethnic Studies Department, and I do research with Native students navigating the college process…and I’ve been involved with College Horizons for most of my grown-up life. I started out as a 16 year old at the program itself and I ended up at Stanford as well and then decided to go to grad school…. 

My book that I'm working on is on College Horizons specifically and thinking not just about the program itself, but kind of how it fits into this broader idea that higher education can be part of Indigenous nation building. So if we think about that we come from sovereign nations, as indigenous people, or sovereign kingdoms in the case of Hawaii, and that our nations are looking to move into the future in a way that's grounded in our cultural practices and who we are, but also brings knowledge from all kinds of different fields and sources to bring us into that future. And so I see higher education as kind of playing a role in that process. And it truly is a process of resistance. Because none of us were supposed to be here. None of us were supposed to be like faculty in these institutions, to be students in these institutions. We were supposed to disappear. And so the fact that we are here and are being able to use these spaces and this knowledge as a means to serve our communities, as a means to bring our communities into the future that they were not supposed to inhabit is really powerful to me.

Camille Leihulu Slagle: That's definitely something I remember. And like another thing I remember just from like College Horizons and everything just in general is like the a lot of the books that we were given, just from like going through the program, I have like some of them on
my bookshelf I like literally brought them up with me, because I think they're like so helpful. But like another like standout thing. I think that sets like maybe like the stuff I've been taught in like College Horizons apart from like, maybe other like native programs I've been in, is how you tell people like not to try to fix their institutions, because institutions are inherently flawed, anyway.

Adrienne Keene: Yeah, thank you for that question, because it's something I think about all the time. And I'm glad that it got across in the teaching that I do with y'all. Because I spent so much time as an undergrad, and definitely, as a grad student trying to make the institution better to make the institution love me, I, in grad school was on twelve different diversity committees, because there were no other Native students in my program, I was the only one. And so I knew if I was not on those committees, that there would be no native representation whatsoever, so that I had to be in those spaces, because I had to advocate for Native people, because I had to be the one who reminded them that they were on indigenous lands, like all of these things, so twelve different committees. So nothing changed at all! (laughter) There's still no native faculty, there's still no native coursework. There's like a handful of Native students. And I spent so much time trying to change that place. And it's energy that I could have used to put into my own work that would have served the communities I care about, I could have graduated a much more complete human, if I hadn't spent so much time like trying to fix the place. …And so I want students to come in with the mindset that they're at their university to steal from the university, to steal knowledge, to steal, resources to be there to take from these places that have taken a lot from our communities.

Camille Leihulu Slagle: Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

Adrienne Keene: You’re welcome. Truly. It's my pleasure.

Camille Leihulu Slagle: Perfect.

Music: MYMA_JUST_0078_05101_The_Lost_Island_APM

Camille Leihulu Slagle: So the Pacific Islander students on campus including myself, we associate ourselves with the Native American student groups on campus and the Native American students themselves, just because we feel like we have a lot more in common with them. Just historically, with like land getting taken away, language and culture getting taken away and all of that stuff, we feel that we have a lot more in common with them than Asian American students on campus, who maybe might not have had that same experience….That's not to say that they haven't, but we just feel like we associate a lot more with the Native students on
campus….we see a lot of ourselves in them, they see a lot of themselves in us. And so we really, like gravitate towards each other on campus.

(music out)

Camille Leihulu Slagle: Okay, so right now, currently we are sitting outside Muwekma, which is the native housing on campus. So right now I'm going to be interviewing Nainoa.

So Nainoa is one of my closest friends. I've known him since I was 10 years old.

Nainoa Visperas: Aloha mai kākou, 'o wau 'o Nainoa Visperas. No O‘ahu mai au. Hi, I’m Nainoa Visperas. I am born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii. I am a class of 2025. So I'm a freshman this year, hoping to major in Symbolic Systems, which is a special major at Stanford. I am a Native Hawaiian and I think that when I introduce myself, you know, I can't help but introduce myself and not introduce my family.

Camille Leihulu Slagle: What was life like growing up as a Hawaiian?

Nainoa Visperas: It was really interesting for me, actually. Because in fourth grade while I went to a native Hawaiian fully immersion school, oftentimes I would tend to isolate the specific aspects of my identity that would often bring me shame. To be honest, you know, we have the highest rate of obesity, the highest incarceration rates, just so many different statistics that, honestly, were a reason for me to try to often disassociate with my culture.

Camille Leihulu Slagle: Have you found in community of other Native students here? And do you feel included in other spaces on campus?

Nainoa Visperas: As you look around, like our campus and stuff like that, there's just so many different values that someone different believes so many different opinions. And what's so good about Pacific Islanders is that I feel like, we understand that we are not meant to, to purely have dominion over aspects of our life, land, people, culture, etc, that we are meant to exist in and improve the state of whatever space that we're in.

Nainoa Visperas: I couldn't tell you the last computer scientist that I knew who was native Hawaiian. Right? I couldn't tell you a single computer science industry in Hawaii, you know? And, actually, fun fact, the year that I took AP Computer Science A in the archipelago, Hawaii, there was five individuals who took AP Computer Science A. Yeah, there is such a small portion of people in this space, you know, so we're most may see the lack of Native Hawaiians in computer science, as something that stifles them from their ability to join this field. I see it as a mere encouragement, because I'm wondering to myself, ‘What perspectives do I hold that a lot of
computer scientists don’t?’ You know, how can I infuse the values, Aloha, Mālama, etc. into a field that's often typically cold hearted, that exists for pure financial gain a lot of the time. Not all the time though. Love computer science! But you know what I mean? It's how can I make this space better? Despite its lack of representation for Native Hawaiians? How can I be the representation that I want to see in this world?

Camille Leihulu Slagle Okay, so it's about 1am. On March 17. I just opened up an email and I got accepted into the Wrigley program, which is the study abroad program I wanted to do in Hawaii, my junior year fall. So this upcoming fall, you basically go to both the Big Island of Hawaii or Hawaii Island, and Kauai. And I can have 10 weeks to do a research project of anything of my choosing, which I think it's going to be so exciting. Especially if I want to consider working at Hawaii Volcanoes National Park or Haleakalā, in the future, one of the national parks, so I'm very excited. And I'm quiet because my roommate’s asleep but like, I'm just so like, oh my god, I get to go back home and do a research project of whatever I want to do. In my element in my own home, like this is okay, sorry. I'm just very excited. Okay, goodnight, everyone.

My mom thinks I'm a little crazy that my study abroad opportunity is coming back home, but I knew that this is something that I wanted to do. And I'm so thankful that I was accepted into the program. And now I get to spend 10 weeks in my own, like home territory, which is something so amazing to me, and on Stanford's budget, might I add!

[road sound]

Camille Leihulu Slagle: It's my last day on the Island for spring break. So what I'm doing, I'm just kind of thinking about my schedule for this upcoming quarter. And what I'm going to do to start preparing for my study abroad because I know that's going to be very important. The study abroad is the Wrigley program, the one where I go back to the Big Island and Kauai. So that's super major for me, I'm super excited, because I know that's where I'll be able to really hone in on a research project and figure out if this is something that I want to do for the rest of my life, especially considering the fact that I want to come home and work in Hawaii. But there are not just a lot of big jobs and opportunities for people in maybe the fields of chemistry or geology besides these huge federal jobs, like the national parks, which are obviously so specific and very few job openings a year if that. So because Hawaii is so small, there's really not this opportunity for a lot of other companies and opportunities like there would be on the continent….I want to be able to find something I love while still be able to afford to live in the place that I love at the exact same time.

[sfx road noise fades out]

Music
Nevaeh Nez: That was Camille Leihulu Slagle. She’s a student at Stanford University.

Camille’s story is part of a project from APM called “Standing in Two Worlds: Native American College Diaries.” I’m Nevaeh Nez. You can find those stories, including mine, in an earlier episode of Educate.

Camille produced her story with Sasha Aslanian. The editor was Stephen Smith with help from Jill Barshay.

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